



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS  
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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**AN ARCHITECTURAL POWERHOUSE:  
SOUTH STREET STATION LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER**

South Street Station at 360 Eddy Street on the Providence waterfront has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of architecture, industry, and community development. Frederick C. Williamson, Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added South Street Station to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Built by the Narragansett Electric Lighting Company between 1912 and 1925, South Street Station is significant for the broad impact it had on the spread of electric service in Rhode Island and as an excellent example of early twentieth-century power plant design.

Narragansett Electric Lighting Company (NELCo) was established in 1884 by entrepreneur Edward Goff and sold within the year to a group of investors led by the prominent Providence businessman Marsden J. Perry (1850–1935). The timing was perfect, as Rhode Island's demand for new, safe, efficient power sources was growing exponentially. Electricity became the dominant source of power for street lighting, factory machinery, and trolley transportation, as well as residential use. When NELCo bought its only rival, the Rhode Island Electric Lighting Company, in 1889, Perry and his fellow investors secured a monopoly on electricity generation in the state.

The South Street Station was the third major plant for the company and the second on the Eddy Street site. Work on the new facility began in 1912-14 with the construction of a boiler house (200 Lb. House) and engine room that incorporated the 257-foot-tall chimney stack from the existing Central Power Station and four new 217-foot chimneys. South Street Station's Classical Revival architecture, with its arcaded fenestration and decorative brickwork, conveyed a sense of stately stability to the public and was typical of power plants of the period.

The demand for electricity from municipalities, institutions, private homeowners, businesses, and industry increased dramatically throughout the 1910s and 1920s. Production at South Street Station increased from 41,000,000 kwh in 1913 to 229,000,000 kwh in 1921. By the early 1920s, NELCo had more than 71,000 customers and its territory stretched the length of Rhode Island along the west side of Narragansett Bay, reaching into Massachusetts and Connecticut. In addition to electric companies, Perry acquired gas, water and electric streetcar companies, creating a vast financial network and opportunities for further expansion. The streetcars encouraged the development of suburbs, which in turn demanded the extension of gas, water and electric service.

New construction at South Street Station between 1916 and 1921 included expanding the boiler house, accommodating a massive turbo-generator in the Engine House, building a portion of the Substation, adding on to the 200 Lb. House and Turbine Hall, and erecting a new Switch House by 1923. In 1924-25, NELCo spent \$4.65 million to erect the 400 Lb. House, an extension of the 200 Lb. House, the perimeter fence, and a water intake tunnel.

While the station remained largely unaltered for the next twenty years, NELCo's corporate structure changed significantly. In 1927, the New England Power Association (NEPA) created Narragansett Electric Company and used that entity to purchase Narragansett Electric Lighting Company. The acquisition ushered in a period of corporate streamlining, perhaps most notably in 1947, when the New England Electric System (NEES) was established as a new holding company

for the many utilities, including NELCo, that had been acquired by NEPA in the early 1900s.

After World War II, NEES initiated a series of capital improvements to double its generating capacity. Two high-pressure boilers were installed in a new boiler house at South Street Station, along with a turbo-generator, at a cost of \$20 million. Though never as efficient as hoped, the updated system was operational by 1955. Ultimately, NELCo phased out the South Street Station in favor of the Manchester Street Power Plant. In 1999, the original 1912–25 structure (minus the Substation) was donated to Heritage Harbor Corporation, a non-profit organization that intends to rehabilitate the building for commercial use and use as a statewide history museum. Today, Heritage Harbor announced details of their latest plans for South Street Station in collaboration with the firm of Struever Bros., Eccles & Rouse.

The National Register nomination for South Street Station was prepared by preservation planner/consultant Joanna Doherty with Matthew Kierstead of PAL. According to Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the RIHPHC, “The monumental South Street power plant is a landmark on the Providence waterfront, and it is significant to the growth of the modern metropolis. Today the site is poised for redevelopment as Heritage Harbor history center and a hotel, offices, and apartments assisted by historic preservation tax credits.”

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed on the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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